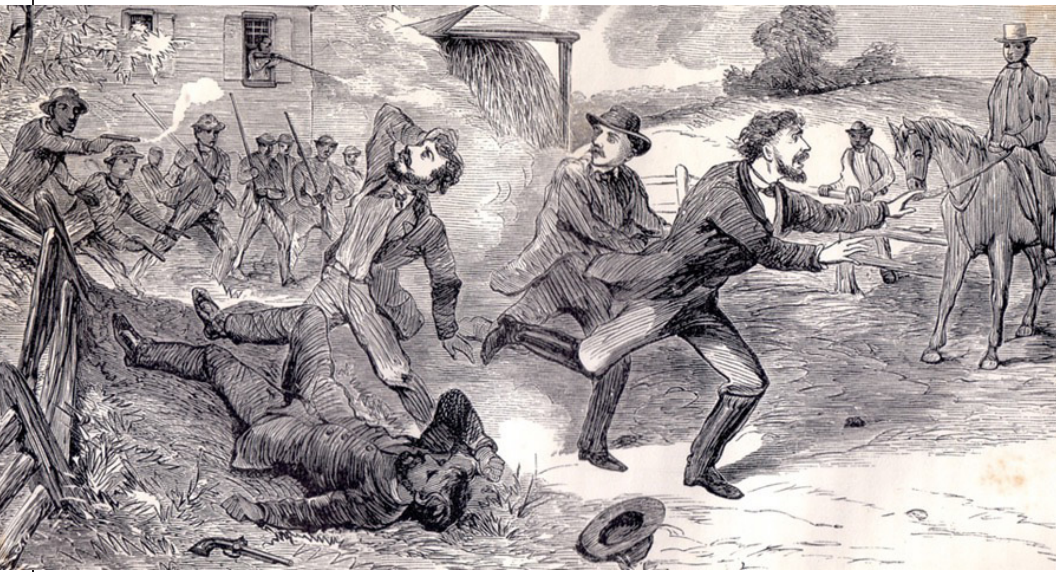


# Bury Me Not in a Land of Slaves



*A short history of Immediatist  
Abolitionism in Philadelphia,  
1830s-1860s*

by Arturo Castillon

*Publishing this text at a time of intensifying struggle against prisons and border enforcement feels appropriate. While much has been written about the Underground Railroad, it seems what is lesser discussed, even in radical circles, is a ground level view of the relationships and forms of organization this vast network took. This text is brief, but hopefully can open up some conversations, especially here in the borderlands, despite its very different geographic and historical setting. The parallels should require little explanation. Philadelphia at one time was its own kind of “bordertown”, who’s history of immediatist struggle should find plenty of resonance here in the southwest. The legal cases discussed echo ongoing cases today in Tucson, as well as San Diego/Tijuana and El Paso/Juarez. The interplay between above ground and underground activity is also striking.*

*As the situation across the US today seems to be intensifying, what new forms will resistance take? What new complicities and forms of collective action can we begin to imagine? When families are ripped apart, how can we intervene more effectively? The next time migrants are tear gassed at a port of entry, will we be there? As humanitarian and legal aid workers are surveilled, put on watch lists, and charged with felonies, what immediate measures can we take to protect ourselves? What would an immediatist strategy against borders and detention look like?*

*- fragments. April 2019*

# BURY ME NOT IN A LAND OF SLAVES: A SHORT HISTORY OF IMMEDIATIST ABOLITIONISM IN PHILADELPHIA, 1830'S-1860'S

BY ARTURO CASTILLON

*I ask no monuments, proud and high,  
To arrest the gaze of the passers-by;  
All that my yearning spirit craves,  
Is bury me not in a land of slaves.*

“Bury Me in a Free Land,”  
by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

In the 1850s, the author of the above poem, Frances Harper, was part of a network of revolutionaries who made it their mission to abolish slavery in the United States. Known as Abolitionists, these partisans of freedom fought for the immediate emancipation of slaves, and developed a specific approach to Abolitionism known as “immediatism.” In the 1820s, the most radical Abolitionists in England and the United States began using this term, “immediatism,”<sup>1</sup> to distinguish their strategy for abolition from the predominant, gradualist one.<sup>2</sup>

The Abolitionists that we are most familiar with today—Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, John Brown—all fought for the immediate emancipation of slaves, a prospect that most people at the time, even most Abolitionists, considered extreme and impractical. Yet in the long term, the immediatist tendency proved to be the most practical and strategic. Instead of miring themselves in legislative strategies or insular sects, the immediatists built organizations to secretly assist thousands of people fleeing from slavery, who in taking the risk of freedom, deprived the southern planters of their primary source of labor—slave labor.

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1. On Harper's and others contributions to the abolitionist movement in Philadelphia, see Still, *Underground Rail Road*, 740-61; Helens Campbell, “Philadelphia Abolitionists,” *The Continent; an Illustrated Weekly Magazine*, January 3, 1883, 1-6.

2. Junius P. Rodriguez, “Immediatism,” *The Historical Encyclopedia of World Slavery*, Volume 1: A-K (Santa Barbara, California, 1997), 364.



MRS. F. E. W. HARPER

In Philadelphia, black abolitionists like Frances Harper, William Still, and Robert Purvis would rise to the forefront of the immediatist struggle against slavery. Because of the city's proximity to the South, it was an important junction point on the Underground Railroad, a secret network of routes and safe houses that people followed northward when fleeing from slavery. Undeterred by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, which legally guaranteed a slaveholder's right to recover an escaped slave, hundreds of escapees made their way to Philadelphia every year, most coming from nearby Virginia and Maryland. With the Compromise of 1850, the Southern slaveholders strengthened the Fugitive Slave Act, which now required the governments and citizens of free states, like Pennsylvania, to enforce the capture and return of "fugitive slaves." This compromise between the Southern slaveholders and the Northern free states defused a four-year political crisis over the status of territories colonized during the Mexican-American war (1846-1848). For the immediatist wing of the Abolitionist movement in Philadelphia, the implications of the new Fugitive Slave Law were clear: it had to be disobeyed and disrupted, even if that meant engaging in illegal activities to aid fugitives.<sup>3</sup>

Already by the early 1830s, the Abolitionist movement in Pennsylvania had begun to radicalize, reflecting developments on the national scene, such as David Walker's 1829 Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, and the 1831 Nat Turner slave insurrection. The older, mostly white Quakers, who had led the movement for decades, favored legal, non-violent measures for gradually abolishing slavery, while a growing tendency of mostly black abolitionists demanded the immediate abolition of slavery.<sup>4</sup> This growing dichotomy, between gradualism and immediatism, reflected the essential difference between reformist and revolutionary politics in the Abolitionist movement.

As the Abolitionist movement became more immediatist in the 1830s, the Vigilance Committee, as it came to be known, emerged as the principal organizational form for assisting fugitives as well as victims of kidnapping. After black Abolitionist David Ruggles founded the first Vigilance Committee in New York City in 1835, Robert Purvis and James Forten formed the "Vigilant Association of Philadelphia" in 1837. Abolitionists in the rural counties surrounding these cities soon followed suit, becoming part of a regional network between Philadelphia, New York City, and other nearby cities, like Boston. The

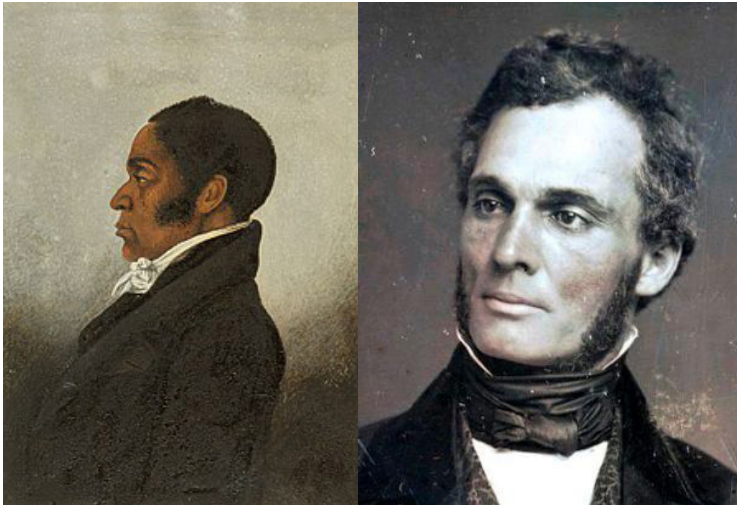
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3. On the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia and Pennsylvania, see Fergus M. Bordenwich, *Bound for Canaan: The Epic Story of the Underground Railroad, America's First Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 2005), 49; Carol Wilson, "Philadelphia and the Origins of the Underground Railroad," unpublished essay on file in the archives at Independence National Historic Park, Philadelphia

4. On the radicalization of the antislavery movement in Pennsylvania, see Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2002), chapter 3.

Vigilance Committees raised money, provided transportation, food, housing, clothing, medical care, legal counsel, and tactical support for people escaping from slavery.<sup>5</sup>

The committee in Philadelphia was a racially integrated group that also included a (predominantly black) women's auxiliary unit, the "Female Vigilant Association." This degree of inter-racial and inter-gender organization was unheard of at the time, even in the Abolitionist movement. The committee also included ex-slaves. Amy Hester Reckless, for example, was a fugitive who went on to become a leading member of the committee in the 1840s.<sup>6</sup>



*The founders of the Vigilance Association of Philadelphia. James Forten on the left, and Robert Purvis, on the right*

The Vigilance Committee acted as the organizational nucleus of the Underground Railroad. While providing strategic resources to fugitives, the committee also carried out bold interventions. Members of the committee orchestrated two of the most notorious slave escapes of the 1840s: 1) that of William and Ellen Craft from Georgia, who used improbable disguises to make their way to Philadelphia in 1848, and 2) that of Henry "Box" Brown from Virginia, who arranged to have himself mailed in a wooden crate to Philadelphia in 1849. These daring escapes were widely publicized in the antislavery press, and these fugitives appeared in public lectures in order to rally support to the Abolitionist cause.<sup>7</sup>

5. Beverly C. Tomck, "Vigilance Committees," <http://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/vigilance-committees/>

6. Joseph A. Borome, "The Vigilant Committee of Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 92 (January 1968): 320-51

7. Elizabeth Varon, "Beautiful Providences": William Still, the Vigilance Committee, and Abolitionists in the

However, by the early 1850s, several waves of repression had left the committee disorganized. These included various anti-abolitionist riots throughout the 1840s, and a string of crippling lawsuits against those who defied the Fugitive Slave Law, including participants in the Christiana Riot of 1851, wherein a slave-owner was shot and killed after attempting to capture a “fugitive.” A new organization was needed, so in 1852 William Still and other abolitionists established a new Vigilance Committee to fill the void left by the older, scattered one.<sup>8</sup>



*William Still, leader of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee from the early 1850s onward until its dissolution at the end of the Civil War.*

Led by William Still, who had escaped from slavery as a child with his mother, the new Vigilance Committee was even more effective than its predecessor, assisting hundreds of fugitives every year in their quests for freedom. By the mid 1850s, Still and the immediatists had transformed Philadelphia into a crucial nerve center of the Underground Railroad, by then a massive network that spanned the U.S. and extended into Canada. The most prominent “conductors” of the Underground Railroad, people like Harriet Tubman and Thomas Garrett, directed hundreds of fugitives to the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee every year.<sup>9</sup>

Although the original Vigilance Committee was a clandestine organization, its reincarnation operated both publicly and in secret. Some of the members of

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Age of Sectionalism” Antislavery and Abolition in Philadelphia, 230-31.

8. *Ibid.*, Varon; Borome, “The Vigilant Committee of Philadelphia,” 320-51.

9. James A. McGowan, *Station Master on the Underground Railroad: the Life and Letters of Thomas Garret* (Jefferson, N.C, 2005); Kate Clifford Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero* (New York, 2004), 122-25.

the committee were lawyers who defended fugitives in the Pennsylvania courts, while others assisted fugitives using methods that were unequivocally prohibited by those same courts. Some even published their names and addresses in the Pennsylvania Freeman newspaper and in flyers so that fugitives could easily find them. In order to generate public support for their cause, they used the antislavery press and public lecture circuit to broadcast the success of their illegal activities—without revealing specific incriminating details and only after the fugitives were safe. Carefully documenting the daily operations of the committee, William Still wrote extensively about the hidden stories of slave resistance and the inner workings of their secret network. When he finally published *The Underground Railroad Records* in 1872, it would be the first historical account of the Underground Railroad.<sup>10</sup>

This delicate balance between secret operations and public activity was dramatically demonstrated in the summer of 1855, when William Still and others organized the escape of Jane Johnson and her children from their owner, John Wheeler, as the boat they were travelling on was docked in Philadelphia, en route to New York. During the escape, Passmore Williamson, one of the only white members of the Vigilance Committee, physically held back Wheeler, a well-known southern Congressman, while Still led Johnson and her children away to a nearby safe house.<sup>11</sup> In the legal proceedings that ensued, a federal judge charged Williamson with riot, forcible abduction, and assault. The judge in the case rejected an affidavit from Johnson affirming that she had left Wheeler of her own free will and that there had been no abduction, and Williamson spent 100 days in Moyamensing prison. The case became a national news story, as Abolitionists used the media to trumpet the success of the Johnson rescue, and to expose the southern slaveholders' domination of the federal court system, which the Abolitionists called a "Slave Power Conspiracy." Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and other immediatist leaders visited Williamson during his confinement and wrote admirably of his actions in the antislavery press.<sup>12</sup>

The Philadelphia immediatists were fully aware of their strategic role in the national struggle against slavery. At a mass meeting in Philadelphia in August 1860, leader of the immediatist wing, William Still, explained that because they were "in such close proximity to slavery" and their "movements and actions" were "daily watched" by pro-slavery forces, they could do, "by wise and determined effort, what the freed colored people of no other State could possibly

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10. Varon, "Beautiful Providences" Antislavery and Abolition in Philadelphia, 233-34.

11. For a detailed account of the Jane Johnson rescue and its implications, see Nat Brandt and Yanna Koyt Brandt, *In the Shadow of the Civil War: Passmore Williamson and the Rescue of Jane Johnson* (Columbia, South Carolina, 2007).

12. *Ibid.*, Brandt.



do to weaken slavery.”<sup>13</sup> By defying the Fugitive Slave Law in a border city, the Philadelphia immediatists exacerbated the growing conflict between the free states of the North and the slave states of the South to a degree that few other Abolitionists could.



*This photograph of Passmore Williamson (right) was taken while he was imprisoned after helping Jane Johnson (left) and her children escape from their slave master.*

The Vigilance Committee organized and agitated against slavery in a city that was very hostile to Abolitionism. Most white workers opposed the abolition of slavery as well as the legalization of racial equality, while the merchant elites and early industrialists of the city had close economic ties to slaveholders in the South and throughout the Atlantic world. There were numerous anti-black and anti-abolitionists riots during the 1830s and 1840s in Philadelphia.<sup>14</sup> Even though they were vastly outnumbered, the Philadelphia immediatists antagonized the slaveholders and their allies—a much larger and well-established enemy—by directly subverting the Fugitive Slave Law in this border city.

As the overall antislavery movement continued to grow and radicalize throughout the North during the 1850s, the southern slaveholders went on the defensive. With John Brown’s raid at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in 1859, and the 1860 presidential election of Abraham Lincoln, who campaigned against the expansion of slavery, the slaveholders in the South became more alienated from the rest of the United States. In February 1861 the Lower South region of the U.S. seceded, creating a separate country called the Confederate States of America, also known as the Confederacy. The U.S. national government, known as

13. National Anti-Slavery Standard, August 18, 1860.

14. Russel F. Weigley, “The Border City in Civil War, 1854-1865” Philadelphia: A 300-Year History, (New York and London, 1982), 295-296.

the Union, refused to recognize the Confederacy as a legal government. The Civil War officially began in April 1861, when Confederate soldiers attacked Fort Sumter, a Union fort in the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina. As the Civil War took its course, Abolitionists from Philadelphia, like Octavius Catto, worked to radicalize the Unionist cause from within. Catto and other Abolitionists organized the enlistment of black troops into the Union army and advocated for a coordinated military assault on slavery in the South, for which they were strongly condemned by white Philadelphians.<sup>15</sup>

Before the war, and during its initial years, much of white Philadelphia was sympathetic to the Southern slaveholder's cause. But with the deepening of the conflict between North and South, most Philadelphians came to support the Union and the war against the Confederacy. A turning point came in 1863 when Confederate troops threatened to occupy the city. Entrenchments were built and people fought to defend the city, defeating the Confederate Army at the Battle of Gettysburg. However, even with the shifting of opinion against the South, most white Philadelphians still believed that the Civil War had nothing to do with slavery. Many white Americans continued to believe that the Civil War was a "white man's war" to preserve the Union and nothing more. White mob violence continued to target Abolitionists and African-Americans, and some white Philadelphians even blamed the Abolitionists for the war.<sup>16</sup>

With all odds stacked against them, the Abolitionists proclaimed the need to end slavery from the very beginning and identified the structural contradictions that would tear the nation apart. But rather than wait for the gradual disintegration of slavery, the immediatists worked to hasten its destruction. In a society that was for the most part hostile to their cause, the immediatist wing of the abolitionist movement performed the historic duty of following through, with long-term consistency, those revolutionary tactics that alone could save the Union and drive the Civil War to a decisive conclusion. More and more slaves escaping from plantations, the enlistment of black troops into the Union army, the abolition of slavery—these tactics were the only ways out of the difficulties into which the Civil War had descended.

The Civil War stemmed from the contradiction between two forms of capitalist production—northern industrial wage labor, and southern agricultural slave labor. The growth and radicalization of the antislavery movement over time made this structural compromise, this "unholy alliance" between Northern industri-

15. Donald Scott, "Camp William Penn's Black Soldiers in Blue—November '99 America's Civil War Feature" <http://www.historynet.com/camp-william-penns-black-soldiers-in-blue-november-99-americas-civil-war-feature.htm>

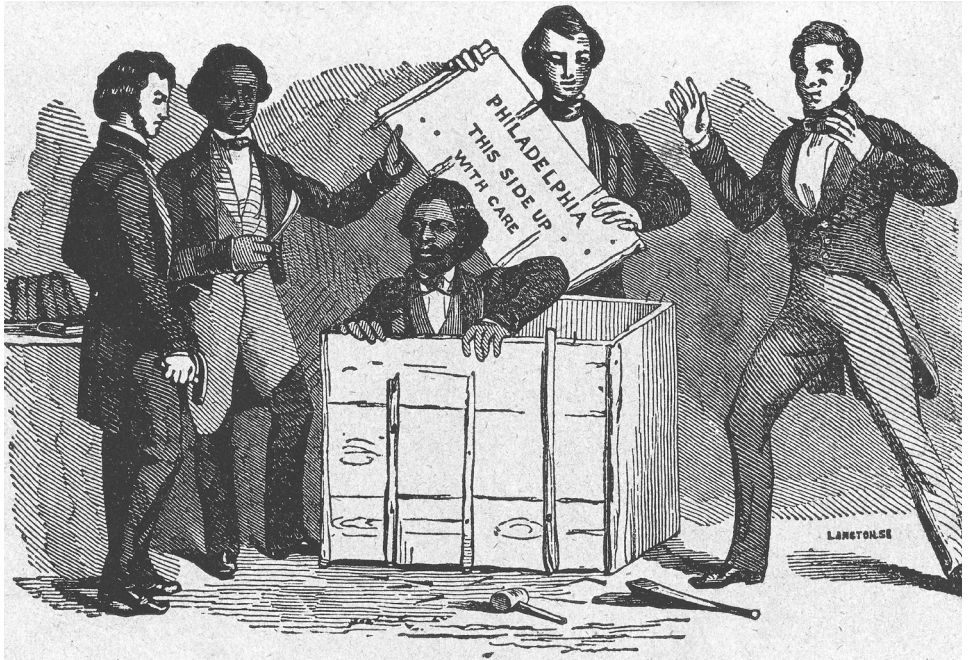
16. *Ibid.*, Scott.

alism and Southern slavery, impossible to maintain. In this, the Civil War confirmed the basic lesson of every revolution, which stands the logic of gradualism on its head. Revolution doesn't develop in a gradual, incremental way, with legislative preconditions, but instead with strategic, uncompromising actions that over time heighten the structural contradictions of the system.

The will for revolution can only be satisfied in this way—with consistent, strategic, revolutionary activity. Yet the masses of people can only acquire and strengthen the will for revolution in the course of the day-to-day struggle against the existing order—in other words, within the limits of the existing system. Thus, we run into a contradiction. On the one hand, we have the masses of people in their everyday struggles within a social system; on the other, we have the goal of immediate social revolution, located outside of the existing system. Such are the paradoxical terms of the historical dialectic through which any revolutionary movement makes its way. The immediatists engaged with this contradiction by responding to the mass self-activity of the slaves, who in their day-to-day resistance to the slave system offered the Abolitionists a means to realize their revolutionary goal.

For over three decades, through ebbs and flows, victories and defeats, the immediatists consistently engaged with the revolutionary struggles of the slave class. They constructed multi-racial, multi-gender organizations that operated both legally and illegally, publicly and secretly, to help people emancipate themselves from slavery, to help them stay free, and to help them gain basic legal rights. In doing so, they fostered the development of a revolutionary movement that precipitated the Civil War and culminated in one of the greatest social revolutions of world history—the emancipation and enfranchisement of millions of slaves and workers in the South during the Reconstruction Era.

By the end of the Civil War, a once-persecuted minority of fanatical Abolitionists were now national leaders. Today we see them as good-hearted activists, or even as moderates. But there should be no mistake about it—all Abolitionists were considered extremists prior to the Civil War, and during most of it. Few people believed that the slave system would fall. In the end, the Abolitionists recognized the historical crisis in front of them for what it was, and the immediatists responded to it more effectively than any other Abolitionist tendency of their time.



RESURRECTION OF HENRY BOX BROWN, AT PHILADELPHIA.

*Though her cheek was pale and anxious,  
Yet, with look and brow sublime,  
By the pale and trembling Future  
Stood the Crisis of our time.*

*And from many a throbbing bosom  
Came the words in fear and gloom,  
Tell us, Oh! thou coming Crisis,  
What shall be our country's doom?*

*Shall the wings of dark destruction  
Brood and hover o'er our land,  
Till we trace the steps of ruin  
By their blight, from strand to strand?*

“Lines,” by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper